

Charlotte Wood, *Love and Hunger: Thoughts on the Gift of Food* (Allen & Unwin, 2012)

Have you written a cookbook yet? What's stopping you?

Cookbooks invariably make up at least 40% of the non-fiction book sales in this country. I don't know whether that fact has influenced Charlotte Wood, whose last novel was the excellent *Animal People*, but she writes a food blog called 'How to Shuck an Oyster', and she's apparently a brilliant cook. Perhaps an editor gave her a little nudge away from literary fiction and towards the more profitable genre of Foodie Books.

Love and Hunger: Thoughts on the Gift of Food bears the dedication 'for my friends'. It might be very rewarding to be a friend of Charlotte's, I thought, as I flicked through the pages, taste buds stirred to life by Duck Ragu with Porcini, and Lamb Tagine with Dates and Raisins (Serves 8). So lots of friends then, or lots of leftovers. The book is a memoir about food and the place it occupies in Wood's life, with added recipes, which seems to be an ever-growing trend in publishing circles. It's about food that is cooked 'with love', and how often have we heard Masterchef contestants and TV chefs use this phrase? I think it just means that a dish has been cooked with a lot of care and attention to detail; in other words, *skill*.

There is a cover recommendation from the esteemed Maggie Beer, who is also a great advocate of cooking with love. Apparently the book contains 'So many tidbits shared ... and things I needed to know'. (If Maggie Beer needs to know so many things, what hope for the rest of us?)

Like Beer used to be, Wood is a passionate home cook with some twenty years experience in the kitchen. There is a lot of practical advice and philosophical discussions about food. Who knew that there were special comfort foods for those flattened by grief or bereavement or illness? And there are 75 simple, classic recipes. But no photos. Not even a sketch of the finished dish. You're on your own here. But Wood's instructions are crystal clear; she guides you every step of the way and her chapter titles are intriguing: Regaining your Kitchen Mojo with Chicken Stock; The Joy of Competence; Do I Dare to Eat a Peach? And at the very end of the book: Five Grains Everyone Should Know How to Cook. (And yes, quinoa is one, even though it's a seed.)

In the introduction Wood has a shot at what she calls 'the almost obscene contemporary obsession with what I think of as fashion cookery'. In this she reminds me of Gay Bilson, who has the same passion for and takes the same pleasure in simple cooking. Charlotte Wood writes even better than Bilson, and Bilson is a *chef*, so her writing is sometimes on a higher level than mere home cooks can aspire to. Charlotte Wood is like a friend who says 'Hey, have you ever thought of cooking couscous in orange juice?'

Ruth Starke

Book reviews: *Love and Hunger* by Charlotte Wood. Ruth Starke.

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